BATTEN

Notes on the Writing of Advertisements

Write on bended knees—studying every word and sentence. Remember that easy writing makes hard reading.

ONE of the reasons why writing is a most difficult art is that everybody has a smattering of it. Letters were invented for use in commercial affairs. Our alphabet and our writing are an inheritance from trading nations. Mercantile records and bills had been expressed for centuries in Sumerian and Phœnician writing before the Greek Iliad or the Aryan Vedas were preserved by anything but word of mouth.

This situation has lived into our own day, for most of our writing has to do with affairs that are not literary.

Writing is the only one of the arts of which we all have a smattering. The person with a trifling degree of education cannot paint a picture or carve a statue or play a violin. If he is to practice one of these arts, he begins only after long study devoted to the one end of learning the art.

In writing, on the other hand, we automatically attain a certain degree of proficiency, and at that stage we meet a strong tendency to rest. Consequently, as writers, most of us are in the condition of arrested development. Because we easily attain a degree of ability that earns us a livelihood, we are likely to cease study, and the inevitable follows. Few of us can write a letter in terms so crystal clear that they cannot be misunderstood. We cannot build a story in which the ordering of events and ideas is so logical that our readers follow us through to the end. We fail to achieve a manner of writing that pleases the ear and mind of our reader, or to understand how to be energetic when force is needed, or to be swift where slowness makes for dullness.

Some skill in writing we all have, but none of us has enough, for those who elect to spend their lives in the Word Business choose thereby a hard taskmaster. To the few who by long and humble study acquire merit he is bounteous, but the many who will not pay the price of skill he treats as unprofitable servants.

Most of us have written one or two things which we think extremely good, and too often these achievements are a source of stupid pride because we have made them, rather than of humiliation because we so seldom equal them.

This hard taskmaster has hard laws. Under his rule those, and only those, succeed who do their writing on their knees. Every unclear thought and every stodgy sentence of which we are guilty inflict a punishment then and there, and make our minds just so much more unclear and our style just so much more stodgy.

Just as Willie Hoppe will tell you that there is no such thing as an easy billiard shot, so the true writer will tell you that there is no such thing as a sentence that it is easy to write well. Even if an advertisement consist merely of the bare statement of the attributes and merits of an article, there are blunders possible in the choice of words and in the ordering of the ideas.

You must scrutinize every sentence, every word, every arrangement of words, and every ordering of thoughts in everything you write. It is only by such eternal vigilance that you can rise superior to the danger lurking in the fact that when writing you are using the same words which in ordinary conversation roll off your tongue almost without choice or discrimination.

While the writer of advertisements should be acquainted with all the departments of rhetoric, yet there are two or three conditions governing our work that specialize it:

First, we are writing to readers who are not interested.

Second, we have strong competition for the attention of those readers.

Third, we are in the work of persuasion.

Now, the publication in which our advertisement appears was bought by its readers for a purpose. That purpose was not to read our advertisement. That purpose was to read something very different, and if our advertisement is to get a reading, it must have certain catch-as-catch-can qualities.

It seems to me that merit Number One in a good advertisement is a *Center of Interest*, a focus, a spot to which the eye goes and must go without question.

If this center of interest were only for the eye, it would have no place in this discussion, which has to do with writing, but the mind must go with the eye. The center of interest must be not only a visual focus, but also a mental focus.

Also, it must be so placed that it carries the mind and the eye into the reading matter. The headline separated from the text, or the center of interest at the bottom of the page, can hardly be a logical arrangement.

My belief is that in most cases the right heading, properly exploited, is the best sort of center of interest.

The center of interest has nothing to do, of course, with style of writing as such, but it has everything to do with gaining the attention and with getting the reader started in our text. But more than this, it will have an effect on our attitude of mind in writing that will tend to make our advertisements, even in their style, more clear and logical. If at the very outset, in our original conception of the advertisement, we begin with and through this center of interest, we have at least a definite starting point. A definite starting point is a great merit in an advertisement, and one that a great many advertisements lack.

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Now let us consider the style necessitated by the conditions under which advertisements must do their work. Certain qualities of the styles of dramatic writers, of poets, and of orators are needed in advertisements. The dialogue in a play must come to you, the hearer, clear, understandable, and unmistakable. When you are at a performance of Macbeth or Lightnin' you cannot turn back and read the preceding sentence. If you did not understand it when it was spoken, you have lost it. That suggests the way in which advertisements should be written. True, your reader, if he miss the meaning of a sentence on the first reading, can go back and read it again; but the chances are that he will not.

All this points to quality Number One in the style of the advertisement writer. It is clearness. Lacking that, our style is bad. Let me repeat, if we are in the habit of writing sentences that are not instantly and luminously clear, we are not good writers of advertisements.

Is simple clearness enough? I think not. This reader whose habits we are reviewing is not much interested in what you are telling; and unless your style has the quality that pleases readers, they will quit your essay and go in search of more alluring paragraphs. This means that your style, if you would write good copy, must be pleasing — must have what the rhetoricians call charm and vividness. Here is where the style and diction of poetry can help. The good poet never has a perfunctory or jaded vocabulary. A prose writer may get along with the use of few words which are worked to death. Not so the poet. Rhyme and rhythm and meter force upon him a flexible and varied vocabulary. For example, he wanted to write "love," but needed a rhyme for "burning," so he used the word "yearning." He needs a word with a first short and next long syllable, while the one in mind has a first long and a second short. Hence he must find a term that will carry his meaning in the meter, or he must recast his stanza, or he must begin afresh. Whichever course he may pursue, it remains that your good poet, by the very nature of his *métier*, is forced to be a hunter and fancier of words. Chesterton and Kipling and Poe and Milton, even when they descend to prose, offer you a racier and more flavorous diction than do most writers that have remained all their lives in the less exciting highways of prose.

I advise you therefore to study not only the lucidity of Shakespeare the dramatist, but also the diction of Keats and Browning the poets.

Obviously, there is more in charm of style than mere diction or choice of words. I say this to escape the possibility of misunderstanding. Nevertheless, the raw material of sentence and paragraph is words. We are in the word business. We must know words. We must know their meaning, their obvious meaning, their secondary meaning. We must know their ancestry and their part in literary history. To know even a rather small vocabulary as we need to know our working vocabulary is a lifetime study. I will give one or two examples of sentences in which the words themselves are well chosen and add much to the effect sought by the writer.

In Isaiah we read: "He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and we hid as it were our faces from him." There is not a word in this sentence that is not simple and clear as dew; yet the effect is most powerful. Consider the thought; strip it of the simple splendor of the King James version; reduce it to abstractions. Then rewrite it in other terms, and you will have a lesson in the choice of words that will last for a lifetime.

Again, in what words should we express the idea which the writer of Ecclesiastes puts thus: "As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool"? Or how should we have phrased that simplest of all invitations: "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"?

If there are rules by which we may gain mastery over the choice of words, I do not know them. We may, of course, say that short words are usually better than long ones, Saxon more feeling than Latin, picture-words more vivid than blank abstractions. Such precepts are good, but they are only primary.

The best two roads to good diction are, first, I suspect, the friendly comradeship of examples such as those just cited, and second, the habit of thinking carefully what one has to say.

This brings back a truth referred to before; namely, that every slovenly sentence of which we are guilty leaves our minds just so much more slovenly.

When we use words and sentences we are practicing self-expression, but this self-expression is different from any other. The painter, the sculptor, the inventor, are all, in their chosen work, expressing themselves, but their medium is not words. Therein lies a stupendous difference. For words and speech, either spoken or suppressed, are the mechanism of thought. You cannot think of the things "foot," or "house," or "man" without thinking of the words "foot," "house," or "man." While a rather foolish person may know a great many words, it remains true that it is impossible for a man to know a great many facts without knowing a great many words.

Words thus being the symbols or counters of things and concepts, it follows that a heedless use of them results in blurred thinking. But, conversely, if you will stubbornly form the habit of clear thinking, you will find, little by little, that the right word will more and more often be waiting at the tip of your tongue or at the point of your pen just when you want to use it. Qualities of style are qualities of thought, whether expressed in that simple but crashing retort, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings"—or in Browning's compact dictum that "a man's reach should exceed his grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

I have referred to the clearness of the drama and the diction of poetry. The third mode of composition that we must try to understand and apply in the writing of advertisements is that of the orator. From that early period of history when grunts and gestures had finally evolved into a system that deserved the name of language, A has always been trying to make B think as he, A, wants B to think. That is the very heart of our endeavor as makers of advertisements, just as it is the heart of the endeavor of the orator. His art and ours is only in part logical argument, but it is wholly the art of persuasion, of touching the springs of human action.

Because I have said that our writing calls for certain of the qualities of drama, poetry, and oratory, please do not understand me as advising that Armco should be presented as the eternal triangle, or that saws be sung in a sonnet, or that biscuits be treated in the manner of Daniel Webster.

From the drama we should learn lucidity; from poetry a fresh, vivid diction; from oratory the charm and force that make for persuasiveness.

I have two practical suggestions:

First, read all you can — let some of it be drama, some poetry, some oratory — but read all in light of the question, "Exactly what is meant — and how skilfully is it expressed?"

Second, have all copy typed and read *aloud* to you by someone that is not familiar with the copy you offer. Tone, *tempo*, and facial expression will offer unconscious but correct criticism.

To sum up: From the very beginning of your conception of the advertisement, make a *center of interest*, either of words or picture, to which the glimpser's eye must of necessity go.

Make your meaning unmistakably clear even to hasty reading.

Study words as a painter studies colors, or as a trout-fisher studies his flies.

Study the art of persuasion. (It is exemplified under your nose every day in speech as well as in print.)

Read and keep on reading. That is merely associating with the good workmen in the word business. You cannot hope to keep on giving out unless you are constantly taking in — adding to your store of fact, of expression, of allusion, of all the raw material from which the ability to produce good writing is built up.

Write on bended knees — studying every word and sentence.

Lastly, remember that easy writing makes hard reading.

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